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SUBJECT: GAY RIGHTS ISSUE RAINS ON EUROVISION PARADE

Classified By: Acting Pol Minister Counselor David Kostelancik for reas  
on 1.4 (d)

11. (C) Summary: On May 16, police arrested more than 50 gay rights activists (80, by some accounts) at Sparrow Hills Park, where they were attempting to gather for an unsanctioned protest march. Organizer Nikolay Alekseyev announced that the march would take place downtown near Pushkin Square, drawing away OMON police and counter-protesters. Police used force during the arrests, but no significant injuries were reported. All but seven detainees were released the same day, with the remainder leaving custody the following day. Alekseyev had declared his intention to link the march and arrests with the Eurovision song contest taking place in Moscow in order to draw attention to his cause; he achieved this goal despite the arrests, as international media reported widely on the juxtaposition of the two events. Statements both from authorities and from anti-gay members of society indicated a high level of hostility towards gay rights, and conversation with gay activists confirm that most gay Russians attempt to keep a low profile in order to guard their own safety and livelihood. End summary.

On Sparrow Hills  
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12. (C) On May 16, police arrested more than 50 gay rights activists (80, by some accounts) at Sparrow Hills park, where they were attempting to gather for a protest march. As in previous years, march organizer Nikolay Alekseyev had unsuccessfully applied to local authorities for permission to hold the march downtown. Alekseyev announced publicly that the unsanctioned march would take place downtown near Pushkin Square as a decoy to draw OMON police and potentially violent counter-protestors, but informed both supporters and approximately 30 sympathetic journalists of the event's real location soon before it took place. Nonetheless, fear of violence kept the numbers of participants down; Alekseyev had told us May 6 that he hoped for 500 participants, but 100 was a more likely number due to the threats involved. Those arrested included a number of foreign citizens, including 15 Belorussians, 1 American, and 1 British citizen, gay rights activist Peter Thatchell. Observers from the U.S., British, Danish, Finnish, and Swedish Embassies were also present but did not interact with the police.

13. (C) Thatchell, who in 2007 was badly beaten and arrested, was in this case released after three hours in detention. Most of the arrested gained their release by 11 PM, but a group of seven Russians and Belorussians were held overnight and released the following day. March participant Irina Fedotova told us May 18 that police used force when making the arrests, including twisting people's arms painfully and in one case tearing an item of clothing off a protester, but that no notable injuries were reported. However, she added that the police "put psychological pressure" on those arrested by threatening them with a charge of "resisting arrest" in addition to that of holding an illegal event. Such a charge would add a 15-day sentence onto the fine of

500-1000 rubles (USD 17-34) that the protesters already had to pay.

¶4. (C) Fedotova also noted that the police swooped onto the protesters with remarkable swiftness. "Within less than a minute" after unfurling a banner reading "Gay Equality, No Compromise" in both English and Russian, one group of 15-20 was arrested upon entering the park. Playing on Sparrow Hills' popularity as a scenic location for newlyweds to take photos, Alekseyev arrived in a limousine with a Belorussian man in a wedding dress. The couple promenaded around the park for some time before police noticed that the blushing bride was male, and arrested them both. When Alekseyev asked what offense they were committing, the police officer replied, "We have reason to think that you are going for a walk with a man dressed as a woman."

#### Gays and Eurovision

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¶5. (C) Although May is a common time of year for gay rights activists in Russia to attempt to hold a march, Alekseyev told us that this year the timing was intentional: he intended to take advantage of the world attention focused on Russia as host the highly touted annual Eurovision song contest, to draw attention to the problem of gay rights in the country. Russia hosted Eurovision this year by virtue of its victory in last year's competition; ironically, both Alekseyev and Fedotova told us that it is an "open secret" that Dima Belan, Russia's winning singer from last year's Eurovision in Serbia -- who opened this year's show with much pomp and a hero's welcome -- is himself gay. Alekseyev said

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that he understood Belan's need to withhold his orientation from the public.

¶6. (C) Alekseyev told us that he perceived hesitation in the authorities' response to his march request -- unlike previous years, authorities did not immediately reject his request for permission to march -- which he tied to GOR concerns over their international image in light of the proximity of the gay-rights controversy with the Eurovision event. Fedotova noted that authorities' decision to hold most detainees until the beginning of the Eurovision event (11 PM) was likely not coincidental; the GOR had as much incentive to separate the two events as the activists had to connect them. GOR efforts to manage the controversy aside, Fedotova noted with satisfaction that international media reporting on Eurovision almost uniformly mentioned the gay activist arrests in their articles, in some cases making the arrests the centerpiece of their reporting. She herself scored a media coup when she was arrested, literally mid-interview, while speaking with the Eurovision news channel. Thatchell told the English-language daily Moscow Times on May 17, "In the minds of most European people, this year's Eurovision Song Contest will be linked to the violent suppression of a wholly peaceful protest." While most singers withheld comment on the gay rights issue, Norwegian winner Aleksandr Rybak joked to the Moscow Times that the biggest gay parade was Eurovision itself.

#### Ugly Attitudes in Society and GOR

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¶7. (C) Public statements leading up to the event, either from authorities or from anti-gay groups, pointed to a high level of danger for participants. Moscow Mayor Luzhkov has referred to gay marches as "satanic," while Luzhkov's press spokesman assailed the march's organizers in a May 7 press conference, saying that they "destroy the moral pillars of our society," and adding, "there have been no gay parades in the Russian capital and there will be none." The Russian Orthodox Church Youth organization held a press conference on May 12 to denounce the gay parade, calling it "spiritual terrorism," and suggesting that Russia must defeat its

perpetrators the same way they defeated terrorists in the North Caucasus. Not to be outdone, on May 14 the Communist Party website posted an anti-gay article by an Oleg Vereshchagin, comparing gay marchers to medieval lepers who wore bells so that people could avoid their contagion, and who, according to Vereshchagin, were justifiably killed in order to protect others.

18. (C) As these harsh quotes indicate, despite Russia's decriminalization of homosexuality in 1993, strong and widespread opposition to gay rights remains at both the societal and government levels. Our contacts told us that most gay Russians attempt to hide their orientation for fear of losing their job or their home (including being evicted by their own parents), as well as the threat of violence. Alekseyev told us that in general, anti-gay violence is limited to activists involved in parades (he has gotten email threats, but does not take them seriously); but Fedotova painted a gloomier picture of life for gays in small towns, where she says violence is "much more likely," and asserts that the majority of gay rights activists over 30 years of age that she knows have seen someone beaten or killed at least once in their lifetime. Alekseyev noted that his organization has tried marches in Ryazan, St. Petersburg, Tambov, Volgograd, and Kirov. Anti-gay protesters always come to the announced locale; about 1000 came to the first Moscow protest, then 150 in 2007, and 50 in 2008.

19. (C) Alekseyev laid the blame for these social attitudes squarely at the feet of the GOR, saying, "the GOR encourages homophobia - it starts with them." He described to us an experiment he tried at a May press conference. In front of reporters, he sent a posting to Medvedev's Live Journal blog asking for greater rights for gay activists, and sent another from a newly created email address praising Medvedev's recent decision to fire the police commissioner. He then showed the assembled reporters that the latter posting had immediately appeared, while the former was nowhere to be seen. "The GOR rejects anything with the word 'gay' in it," said Alekseyev, noting that human rights activists are sometimes offered protest sites that are deliberately far from the center of town, but "we don't even get the middle-of-nowhere requests."

As for GOR Human Rights Ombudsman Lukin, Alekseyev said Lukin very rarely responds to requests or complaints, and "only says that we have rights, but says there's no need for any measures." Alekseyev told us that his organization plans to bring an official complaint to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. He also pointed out that Russia promised the UN Human Rights Council, during its Universal Periodic Review, to reply to the Council by June regarding

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its policies on freedom of assembly for sexual minorities. Alekseyev said that such international attention is vital to his cause.

Comment

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110. (C) Given the level of vitriol in the recent anti-gay statements that appeared in association with the protest, it is fortunate that so few injuries were sustained during the event. Alekseyev can also rightly point to a successful gambit in timing the protest to coincide with the Eurovision contest. However, it is also clear that these activists represent a small minority among gay Russians, willing to risk their physical safety in the current environment. Some gay activists are pursuing marriage in Russian courts as well, since, as Alekseyev points out, the Russian legal code contains no provisions against it. However, it appears that this type of tolerance will take some time.

BEYRLE